



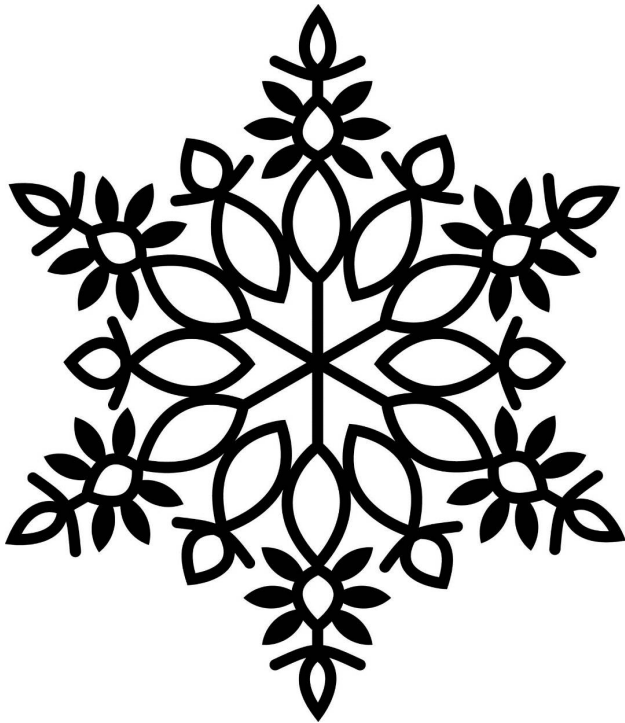
PARKER J.
COLE

A GROOM
for
AGATHA

the
BLIZZARD
BRIDES


A Groom for Agatha

*The Blizzard Brides
Series, #27*



Parker J. Cole

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Dedication

*To the Author and Finisher of my faith, who has
never left me alone.*

10 And he said, Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.

11 And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.

Ruth 3:10-11



Chapter One

Outskirts of Last Chance
August 1879

“That ridiculous nincompoop!” Agatha growled as she slammed the bread dough on the table. Flour puffed in the air like billowing clouds. “What nerve does he have to tell me what to do?”

Slap went the bread dough again. Thank goodness it was a hearty loaf she was making, or it would have splattered into doughy, yeasty pieces. As it was, a slight mist of white covered her black hair.

Agatha blew out a breath, sending an errant curl up into the air like a black flag.

How she wished the bread was Pastor Collins’s head!

“Telling me I have to get a husband,” she grumbled, rolling the dough into a ball, and kneading it with angry fists that would have

done a prizefighter some harm.

“I had a husband.” Tears choked her voice, and she paused in her pulverization of the bread, taking her floured hands, and cupping her face. The earthy smell of yeast filled her nostrils. She didn’t care that flour and bits of dough clung to her cheeks and forehead. What did any of that matter when the pastor was trying to make her replace her husband?

Oh, she knew what the pompous minister said to her three days ago. “Now, Mrs. Waters, it’s not about replacing your husband. It’s about making sure you don’t fall into temptation without the protection of a man.”

It had taken all her self-control to not hit the man. “Pastor Collins, I’ve got my husband’s men protecting me every single day since Paul passed away.”

She fought to keep from crossing her fingers. It wasn’t a lie *per se*, just a tiny hint of truth stretching.

“That’s fine. But it’s better for a woman of your years to have a man.”

“Of my years!” Her voice had risen several octaves. “Are you calling me an old woman, Pastor Collins?”

Her hands fell from her face and some of

her morose feelings dissipated as she remembered the way his face had blanched of color. A light smile lifted her mouth. She must have looked like an avenging angel. Paul always said she could scare Lucifer.

“Uh... uh... no, of course not.” The pastor had tugged at his collar. “You’re still a very young woman of forty-two years.”

“Thirty-eight, Pastor.” Looking back at the conversation, how had she kept herself from strangling the man? Forty-two? She took after her mother in looks, appearing more youthful than her years. When her mother was forty-two, she was courted by men half her age!

“Yes, yes,” he’d tried to dismiss his blunder with an impatient wave of his hand. “But a woman like you is better with a husband by her side.”

“And who are you to determine that?” she’d snapped.

“The Lord’s anointed,” he said. “The one sent to make sure his flock follows His edicts and does not fall into a well of sinfulness.”

He’d narrowed his eyes at her and despite her affront, she could feel his steely determination behind the façade of his pomposity. The man may be many things, but

a weakling he wasn't.

"Many of the women already have new husbands. It's been nearly a year since the tragedy that struck our town, Mrs. Waters." Pastor Collins's head lowered, his brow furrowing. "No one has responded to your letters?"

Agatha tried not to squirm. Darn it all, she wasn't a child having to answer to him! "That's correct."

The men couldn't respond if she hadn't written, could they?

After a long tense silence, he'd lifted his chin. "Well, try again."

He'd stood and taking his hat, saw himself to the door. "I expect to hear something from you soon."

His veiled warning couldn't have been more plainly spoken.

The entire encounter had drained her. Three days later, she oscillated between reluctance and resignation.

Pastor Collins's interference may have been unwanted, but, and she hated to concede anything to the preacher, it wasn't wrong. She did need a man about the farm again. Paul's absence was sorely felt in more than one way.

After his death, the running of the farm had fallen to Jessup Tucks, a wiry white man a couple years older than Paul. A former outlaw, Paul had taken compassion on the man when he found him in a drunken stupor about five years ago. He gave him an honorable living as the foreman.

She couldn't say she liked the man, though he had always been respectful to her. If she caught a certain gleam in his eyes off and on during the years, she never said anything about it.

After all, she was her mother's daughter. Being stared and admired by men came with the honor.

Moreover, Paul's presence protected her.

That was gone now. And Jessup, had begun to make her nervous.

Sighing, Agatha returned her attention back to the bread. She rolled it up gently, as if apologizing for her earlier treatment, and placed it in the wooden bowl Paul had made her some time ago. It would take a few hours for it to rise before she could bake it.

For a half hour, she tidied up the kitchen, drawing the chore out for as long as she could. In the distance, she could hear the bell ringing

from the bunkhouse where the men were, and Tiny, the cook, hollered for the men to get their breakfast as he didn't have all day to lollygag.

When the kitchen was as neat as a pin, she dragged her feet from it and into the small room Paul used as his study.

Months had gone by since her husband passed, but some days...

Agatha splayed her fingers across her chest, feeling the pain of his loss like a physical ache. Could any man ever take the place of the most wonderful man in the world? For twenty years, she was blessed with a good marriage. Many wished they could have what she had. She wouldn't be greedy.

Going over to the table, she pulled open the drawer and pulled out the six letters she'd received last year and went through them.

How was she supposed to invite another man into her home, to have him sit in this office? Put his hands on Paul's things?

She shuddered. Share her bed?

Even that, a mere marital duty for some women, had been a blessing. Paul, ever manly, passionate, and considerate had made the act one they engaged in with reckless frequency

and abandon.

She wasn't one of those women who believed in 'convenient marriages.' If you married a man, you gave him certain rights of the flesh that belong to him.

Just as he gave his wife connubial rights to his body.

Yet, she'd been prepared for widowhood. Ready to live her life without Paul's touch ever again.

Unlike her mother, Paul had been the only man she'd known in the biblical sense. The idea of another man taking her as his wife in that way...

She stared down at the letters again and recoiled, dropping the letters back into the drawer and backing away from them. Pressing a fist to her mouth, she shook her head vehemently.

She couldn't let some strange man touch her. She just couldn't.

A heavy knock broke in on her silent scream. Shutting the drawer closed, she smoothed down the front of her dress. Squaring her shoulders, she rolled her neck, lifted her chin, and headed to the front door.

Her hand clasped to the knob, she drew in a

sharp breath and then pasted on a smile. When she opened it, a shaft of sunlight pierced her eyes. Holding her hand up, she complained lightly. "Oh! That sun's bright today."

A shadow moved in front of her, blocking the light and the heat. Letting her hand fall to her side, she sighed in gratefulness. "Well, thank you whoever you are."

"I wonder who made you mad that you took it out on the bread."

As the deep voice chuckled, the ripple of the man's laughter skittered down her spine in an odd way.

She knew who that voice belonged to. So why should it have such an effect on her?

The thought passed quickly as she grinned and cried out, "Lance! Lance Montcalm! Is that you?"

"Of course, Miss Agatha."

She hooted and then raised her arms. "Come closer and give your friend's mother a hug."



Stepmother, Aggie darling. Noah's stepmother.

Lance refrained from making the correction as he braced himself, taking Agatha Waters

into his arms and hugging her close.

Could she feel his heart pummeling his chest?

Could she hear the way it thundered as her womanly softness pressed into his body, scorching his senses even through a layer of clothes?

No, of course not.

Then why was his mind playing a cruel joke? Was it his imagination that supposed the hug had gone on longer than usual? Did Agatha's hands caress his back?

No, that couldn't be it. See how quickly she pulled away from him and stepped back? See how her hands roved over him, smacking away at the dust of the trail on his clothes as if he were a boy again?

Aggie darling, I'm a man. I don't want your mothering. Can't you see that?

It was one of a thousand sweet nothings locked in his heart, begging for sound. Instead, he said what was expected of him.

"You're looking well, Miss Agatha."

An understatement. When she opened the door, the sunlight had flooded over her skin, turning it into a bronze finish worthy of any sculptor. Flour dusted her midnight black hair,

and a few sticky pieces of dough dotted her rosy cheeks and forehead.

That perpetual strand of untamed hair lay against her high rounded forehead. Her pouty lips flushed pink, her button nose was smeared with flour.

How he missed seeing her, even when it was torture to be in her presence.

“It’s good to see you, Lance,” she greeted, her honey brown eyes filled with a warm light. “How long has it been? A year or so?”

Two years, six months, and ten days.

“Something like that,” he replied. “Do you mind if I come in?”

“Come in?” she blinked. “Oh! Oh! Of course, come in, Lance.”

She stepped back and he walked into the house. His eyes wandered around the room. It was much as he remembered it. Inviting, homey, and comfortable. Vibrant rugs brightened the drab wooden floors. Colorful thick throws spruced up the worn furniture. Neat and clean, and welcoming.

Once the door closed, Agatha came around him and stood in the center of the room.

The center of it all.

“Have you had something to eat, Lance?”

“Not yet. I just got off the ferry and came straight here.”

His stomach rumbled then, and they laughed.

“Well, when a man’s stomach growls, there’s only one answer for it.” She turned and started towards the kitchen. “Come and keep me company. Tell me what you been doing since the last time I saw you.”

Lance followed her, entering the best room of the house. A bowl of bread rising sat on the ledge near the window. How often had he come here when he and Noah were younger? Countless times.

He sat at the table and set his gear under it. “How’s Noah?” he asked at the same she said, “How’s everything?”

Shaking his head, he nodded toward her. “You first, Miss Agatha.”

She tied her apron as she went into the back room where the ice box lay. “Noah’s doing fine. I got a letter from him not a month or so ago. He and his wife are expecting their second child. Sometime around Christmas.”

“Good to hear. I gotta get down that way soon and visit my godson.”

“I know Noah will appreciate it.”

She came back in, carrying a slab of bacon that she set on the counter. "Is that why you're here? Noah sent you to look in on me?"

Would you believe that I couldn't spend another year without seeing your face?

"He sure did," he lied. He'd not visited Noah in some time although he wrote off and on when he could. "I figured I'd come and spend a few days with you."

"That's kind of you." She smiled and his breath caught in his chest. *How could the Lord make one woman look so lovely?*

"I may put you to work though. We could use a little extra help ever since Paul died."

A jolt went down his spine. *Paul Waters was dead?*

Lance took a finger and traced a groove on the table. "I am—was sorry to hear about that."

How had he missed that? Lance wracked his brain furiously behind what he hoped was a sympathetic face. Did Noah ever write and tell him his father had passed away? He couldn't remember.

His chest tightened. Paul had been a good father figure to him. To think the man was no longer of this world was a shame.

Good thing he didn't ask after the man when he came. When he didn't see Paul anywhere, he just assumed he was out in the fields and would catch up with him at some point in the day.

Now, that moment wouldn't ever come.

His stomach contracted as a tightness swelled in his throat for the man who he'd loved almost as much as a real father. Turning away, he stared out at the window, trying to blink away the sudden tears that moistened his eyes.

"Lance?"

Coughing, he blinked and turned back toward Agatha. His eyes roved over her features again. Though she still looked youthful and vivacious as ever, he noticed the slight melancholy on her face. Saw the tired lines about her eyes and mouth. One or two folds along her smooth forehead.

"How did it happen?"

She lifted her brow. "You didn't read about it in the papers? It was carried all over the country."

He felt like he'd walked into a field of gopher holes. One word misspoken and she would know the truth.

“Those are just the newspapers,” he said in an offhand manner. “I want to hear it from you.”

Her honey brown eyes widened with an odd sort of dazed look. Before he could question her reaction, she'd turned away and drew a long knife from the butcher's block.

“Back in September, the town wasn't doing too good. Drought and all. The menfolk went hunting in Indian territory. A blizzard came down, hard and fast. We all waited but they never came back.”

Lance swallowed. “That's what took him.”

“No,” she said in a low, almost dead voice. She wiped the blade of the knife on her apron before going over to the bacon. “When we didn't hear from them, another group of men rounded up to go and try to find them. Paul was one of them. Another blizzard came and that's what took him.”

“That sounds like him,” Lance said, thinking of the dead man's honor. “Always quick to help others whenever it was within him.”

“That's Paul.” The glint of the knife caught the sunlight as it sliced into the meat like butter. “I was so proud of him. Never thought

that day would be the last day I'd see him."

"I'm so sorry, Miss Agatha."

And he was.

She lifted her eyes from the meat and gave him a sad smile. "I had twenty good years with Paul, Lance. I was blessed more than most."

"Of course."

"Noah came down for a while after he heard about his father's death. That boy," she shook her head. Whether it was in fondness at her stepson, or trying to rid her mind of darker thoughts, he didn't know. "He treats me like a real mother."

"Well, to him, you are like his mother, Miss Agatha."

"You think so?" She reached overhead and grabbed the handle of the heavy cast iron skillet. "He behaves as if I were an old woman sometimes."

Without being conscious of his actions, Lance's eyes roved over her figure slowly. She didn't have a tiny waist but neither did it bloat in the middle. The dark brown dress emphasized her high, firm breasts and wide hips without being forward. She had a womanly shape that would appeal to any man

above ground.

“Hardly an old woman, Miss Agatha,” he drawled as his eyes came back up to meet her startled gaze.

A moment later, the cast iron skillet slipped from her fingers, and she screamed.



Chapter Two

One moment, she was screaming as the skillet fell on her foot. The next she was gasping as Lance lifted her into the air.

“Good Lord!” she pleaded as she pressed her hands against Lance’s chest. “What in the world are you doing?”

His eyebrows squished together in the middle of his forehead. “Are you all right?”

Agatha looked away. “I’m fine enough for you to put me down.”

Honestly, even if her foot were broken, she’d feel better on the ground than held so easily and effortlessly in Lance’s arms like this. It made her aware of things she’d rather not be aware of.

Like the fact that the muscles of his chest felt like stone. Or, the way his arms crushed her against him. And, the worst of all, the way he smelled. Like man and earth and musk all at once.

And goodness! She had to have imagined that heated look in his gaze before the skillet

fell.

“We’ll see.” He propped her further against his body. She felt like a ragdoll being pressed against a brick wall. Really, she should tell him he was holding her too tight.

The words never left her mouth.

He carried her into the main room and set her gently on the couch. Agatha’s breath lodged itself in her throat as Lance knelt, taking off her shoe and sock. His dark hands smoothed over her foot before taking a long dark finger and tracing the angry red line across her toes.

Goosebumps lifted on her skin at the sensation.

“Did that hurt, Miss Agatha? Can you move your toes?”

Agatha couldn’t get her foot to obey her commands. Not because of the sting of pain that was dissipating as she sat there. It had to do with how good Lance’s hands felt on her foot. Warm, calloused, and tender. Together with the ebbing throb, courtesy of the cast iron skillet, it sent her senses in all sorts of direction.

His head lifted. Those walnut-brown eyes were wells of dark water. A sense of drowning

into their depths came over her.

“Miss Agatha?”

Taking in a deep breath, she forced herself to get her thoughts together. Tugging her eyes away from Lance, she looked back at her foot. Carefully, she moved her toes. Besides the throb and the sting, her toes were fine. Well, not fine, perhaps. But not broken.

“I’ll be all right in a few minutes,” she said. “Just gotta wait until the pain goes away.”

Lance lifted her foot up by the heel and examined it much like she supposed a doctor would. “Well, I think it’s going to bruise, Miss Agatha. Let me get a cold towel for you.”

“That’s not necessary, Lance.”

“Of course it is. You’ve done that for me more times than I can count.” He grinned as he stood.

Goodness, had he always towered above her like this?

He unbuttoned his sleeve and rolled it back to his elbow, revealing an almost white scar against the dark, mahogany skin of his forearm. “Remember when I got this?”

“Do I?” Her lips twist wryly. “How can I forget?”

Tugging the sleeve down and buttoning it

up again, he gave a curt nod. "There you go, then. I'll be back."

He left and the air rushed back into her lungs.

What was happening to her? For goodness' sake, this was Lance Montcalm, her stepson's best friend. Why was she acting and responding this way?

Agatha leaned forward and stared at her foot, seeing the red line across her toes. She moved them again, and even though she winced, the pain was considerably less.

The only reason she was in this predicament was because of the way he looked at her. His eyes had traveled over her body with a man's appreciation. Like the way Paul would look at her through the years.

Hardly an old woman, Miss Agatha.

The way he'd spoken those words with a low, husky undertone that numbed the feeling in her fingers. Before she knew it, the skillet had fallen on her foot.

Agatha leaned her head back against the couch.

Lance couldn't have been looking at her that way. It just wasn't possible.

Or was it?

Something teased the edges of her memory, a slight image of Lance a few years younger. The whole picture was fuzzy, just out of reach of full recollection. She sensed it was important, but as she tried to bring the memory to the forefront of her mind, it drifted further way.

She sighed and thought of his scar.

That was a day she'd never forget.

A scream had splintered the early morning air, coming from the barn. Fear gripped the cords of her throat and knotted them up. She raced outside to the barn screaming Noah's name. When she unlatched and yanked open the barn door, the sight that met her eyes sent her sprawling to her knees.

Lance had cut open his arm, having fallen on an upturned pitchfork. Blood trailed down his arm, soaking his clothes, while beads of it gleamed like rubies on the sharp-tipped prongs.

Noah laid next to Lance, uninjured and unconscious.

He'd fainted at the sight of the blood, something ten-year-old Lance would never let him forget.

She'd just been a new wife to Paul for a few

months. Uncertain about her ability to act in a motherly stead to Noah and his friend that came by often.

How could she reconcile that boy with the man who had carried her in here? A man who had piqued and stirred her interest in a purely feminine way. Made her notice things she'd not thought about in years.

"Here we go," he said.

She glanced up to see Lance come around the couch and squat by her feet again. When his now cool hand touched her feet, she hissed between her teeth.

"Still hurts, huh?" He took the towel and placed it along her toes. "This should help some."

The coolness of the damp towel did help to ease the throbbing. She leaned back once more and stared up at the ceiling.

He'd come a long way from the young boy she'd known. His skin had long shed the pudginess of adolescence, having tautened over the now angular features. Those gangly, clumsy legs that darted around in the fields were lean, sturdy, and muscled from the years of hard work. First as a ranch hand, then on the railroad for some time before a blessing

from God made him strike it rich during the Gold Rush.

“Is this helping, Miss Agatha?”

Agatha’s eyes grazed over the short, bushy beard around his chin and jawline, seeing the full lips that managed to bear a thoroughly masculine appeal.

She remembered when he first started getting facial hair!

“It is, thank you, Lance.”

He nodded and bent his head again. That hand of his wrapped around the heel of her foot and her stomach flopped.

Dear Lord in Heaven, the touch of his hand felt so good.

Was it because it had been a long time since a man had touched her that she was acting this way? Nearly a year since Paul’s death. Perhaps that’s why.

Some of the tension eased out of her. That had to be the reason. Lance was a handsome man, no use denying that. Any woman would be affected.

But not her. She couldn’t, wouldn’t feel that way about him.

It’s just as well.

“What is?”

She blinked and refocused. *Gosh, his eyes!*
“What did you say?”

Was that her voice so breathless?

“You said it’s just as well,” he repeated. “I was asking you what is?”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized.” She smoothed her hand over her stomach. The touch of his hand was starting to get to her in a way she didn’t want.

Time to nip this in the bud.

“That’s enough now, Lance. I’m not a cripple.”

Without another word, he drew away. “I would never think that, Miss Agatha.”

She took a moment to put her sock and shoe back on, already missing the touch of his hand.

“What were you saying is just as well?”

“Oh.” She stood and tested the pressure on her foot. Besides a slight twinge, it was fine. She headed toward the kitchen again.

And no, she wasn’t running away from Lance’s disturbing presence. The man was starving, wasn’t he?

“Pastor Collins is forcing me to get married again.”



Lance licked his teeth, trying to keep his face from showing his shock. Agatha's back was towards him, giving Lance those few extra seconds to compose himself.

By the time she turned around, he was able to say in careful tones, "Force you to get married again? How can he?"

Her cheeks flushed as she picked up the knife and started slicing at the bacon once more. "He's the pastor, Lance. Pompous little man that he is."

"How did this come about?"

"Back in October, we had a big meeting when we realized none of our menfolk were coming back." The corners of her mouth twitched, and her grip on the handle of the knife tightened for a second before she went on. "Pastor Collins gave this speech about protecting the town and the women from sin and damnation. We either have to get new husbands or leave Last Chance."

Lance blinked. "Surely, you all made him take a long walk over a short pier, Miss Agatha."

A helpless laugh escaped her mouth as she set the knife down. "What can I say, Lance? All of us are grieving in some way. There were

those of us who objected and decided to leave. But I think many of us went along with it because somewhere inside, we all know he's right."

"In what way?"

Her voice was quiet. "You can't make it out here alone. Women and men need each other."

Lance said nothing as Agatha picked up the skillet that had fallen and wiped it out with a towel before placing it on the stove. He went over her words again, something telling him there was more to the story.

"What's wrong, Miss Agatha?"

She looked over her shoulder. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong."

"You can't fool me," he told her, stepping further into the kitchen. "There's something going on that you're not telling me. More than just the pastor trying to make you get married again. Whenever bread and flour gets on your face and in your hair, that means something is bothering you."

He knew he had the gist of it when she turned away. "It's nothing to concern yourself with, Lance."

His nostrils flared. Did she think she could dismiss his concern for her well-being?

Perhaps he hadn't the right to worry over her. The familial ties that existed between her and Noah were from the bonds of marriage. Noah had the obligation as his father's son to care for his widow.

But Noah wasn't here. Lance was. Even if Noah had known he was here, wouldn't he expect his best friend to care for his stepmother if something was wrong?

His jaw set. Despite everything, he would do what he could to help her. "I am concerning myself with it, Miss Agatha. Noah and Mister Paul would expect it of me."

"No, they wouldn't," she denied, a scowl on her face. "They're fully aware I can take care of myself."

The sound of the bacon sizzling in the skillet was loud against his ears. Lance marched toward where she stood by the stove and grabbed her arms in a firm grasp.

An 'O' shaped her lips. "Lance? Why are you--?"

"Let me let you in on something, Miss Agatha. No matter how strong a woman is, a man never ceases to worry about her. Your husband and stepson aren't here but I am."

Her lower lip trembled the slightest. It

nearly sliced his heart in two to see her pain but he had to make this point.

“Now tell me what’s bothering you.”

Agatha’s eyes roamed over his face as if trying to see inside of his mind. When she spoke at last, it was only to say, “The bacon’s about to burn.”

He let her go and stepped back. She needed some space.

Going over to the table, he sat down and waited as she finished cooking his breakfast. Once the bacon and eggs were fried, she gave him a good helping on a plate and set it before him.

After giving thanks, he gave her a half smile. “Smells good,” he said, wishing to ease the tension.

Agatha sat beside him as he satisfied his hunger. She said nothing the entire time he ate. He knew it had to do with the fact that he’d crossed over an invisible boundary he’d always been careful to never bridge.

That of a friend of the family.

How could she know he’d crossed the line when he was nineteen years old and realized that the burgeoning, confusing feelings for his friend’s stepmother were more than he

bargained for?

When he'd finished, Lance pushed the plate away, and rubbed his slightly distended belly.

"That was good. Thank you."

She leaned forward to grab his dishes when he grabbed her wrist and locked his fingers around it. "Talk to me, Miss Agatha. No more stalling."

Slowly she sat back. "All right, Lance. I'll tell you. Paul had used the farm for collateral for a loan we needed. He never told me about this. If I don't get the money to pay back the loan, I could lose the farm."

"I see."

"Do you?" Her honey brown eyes hardened. "Do you know the men who were loyal to Paul are having a difficult time taking orders from me? Jessup Tucks has been making decisions without my knowledge. I've not taken him to task over it, but eventually I will have to."

She pushed away from the table. "Not to mention I caught Jessup sneaking into the house one afternoon, all quiet-like. He—"

Her voice cut off and she gave a shudder. "He didn't do anything, but I could feel his dark intentions. If I hadn't come out of the kitchen with that knife in my hand—"

“What happened?” *Did the man try to accost her? Hurt her?*

“He tried to pretend otherwise, but I saw him go toward my bedroom, the most... sickening expression on his face.”

She shivered. “It was revolting.”

“Get rid of him.” His blood boiled at the thought of Jessup doing anything to Agatha.

“I can’t. The men won’t listen to me, but they’ll obey him.”

She blew out a breath and that curl bounced in the air again. “The pastor wants me to get married again, but how can I? I loved Paul, Lance. I didn’t want anyone else. I still don’t. But at the same time, like I told you, women and men need each other.”

“Women need men to protect them against the likes of all the Jessup Tucks in the world,” he remarked in a dark tone. “How long has Jessup been making a nuisance of himself?”

“Within the past two weeks. I’d captured glimpses of his attention before, but he never did anything. Paul’s presence kept him at bay. I no longer have that.”

Agatha’s shoulders drooped. “I don’t want to lose the farm, but I don’t have the money to get it out of debt. Jessup must go, but who can

I get to replace him? Pastor Collins wants me to marry, but I can't imagine myself with some strange man. What do I do?"

Lance's heart thudded as the blood raced in his veins. He could barely capture his breath.

Was this a gift from the Lord? Was this the reason why the urge to see her had driven him back to this house?

He moistened his throat. Why question it? He needed to grab this opportunity and take it.

For eleven years, he attempted to move on with his life. Tried to ignore the longings for a woman who could never love him and come to grips that he would never have the chance to claim her for his own.

This chance... this moment... may never come again.

He would not waste it.

"There's something you can do, Miss Agatha."

"What's that?"

He stared deep into her eyes. "Marry me."



Chapter Three

There was no doubt he had stunned her. For a few seconds she simply stared at him, and then she fulfilled one of his worst nightmares.

She smiled and patted his hands. “Lance, you can’t mean that.”

His face must have shown something, for suddenly the smile on her face dropped and her lovely mouth curved downward. “Goodness! You mean it, don’t you?”

A bulge formed in his throat. If Agatha had any idea how much he meant it, she wouldn’t have treated the situation in such a way. Though her reaction hurt, he didn’t blame her. This love he’d carried for her was one-sided and unrequited. While the idea of having her as his wife had tantalized him throughout the years, never to be more than a dream, for her it must be a shock.

Lance couldn’t help but be cheered somewhat by her reaction. She hadn’t said no right away.

He recovered and lifted his shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. "You should know me by now, Miss Agatha. I wouldn't have suggested it if I hadn't thought about it."

Again, she stared at him, her eyes fixed on him as if he had done something completely unnatural to her.

Her mouth opened and closed several times before she said, "Why would you want to do that? Lance, I'm Noah's mother!"

"His stepmother," he returned. The small silence had given him a chance to still his beating heart and think about this from her perspective. If he had any chance of her saying yes to marriage, he had to make it plausible.

The love that begged for release would have to wait.

"That's neither here nor there," she retorted.

"Think of it. You're not his mother. You're his father's wife. There is a difference."

"Oh!" That black curl flew up into the air as she huffed indignantly. "Do tell."

"Think of it. Noah and I are only eight years younger than you. Isn't that more of a relationship of an elder sister than a mother?"

"Paul considered me his son's new mother."

Quietly he asked, "Did you?"

Agatha gaped at him.

"Noah's my best friend, Miss Agatha. And yes, he does love you, but it's as his father's wife, not his mother. He's taking care of you in that same way. And, though you call yourself Noah's mother, do you really see yourself in that way?"

"What does this have to do with marrying you?"

His heart leapt. She still hadn't come right out and said no.

"Nothing, and everything. If I were indeed marrying Noah's mother, there would be some awkwardness because familial ties would bind you and he together. But, despite your closeness, those bonds of blood aren't there."

"Bonds of blood are not as important."

"I agree, but it makes it easier for you to see how marrying me won't be a hardship to Noah if you did. Because I wouldn't be marrying Noah's mother, but Mister Paul's wife."

"They're one and the same."

His fingers contracted on her wrist. "Are they?"

Agatha bit her bottom lip, her brow

crinkled now, eyes wide and glassy. He let that sink in, saying nothing. All the while, he sent a thousand prayers to the Lord, begging, bargaining, promising anything as long as she accepted his proposal.

Lance had no illusions that she would love him... at first. Mister Paul's memory was still there, and he would never try to usurp that memory. He only wanted the chance to try to win her love.

Didn't any man want just an opportunity?

"How would being married to you solve my problems?"

The tightness in his chest eased away. "I have the money from what I'd mined during the Gold Rush. It's a substantial amount that I've never touched in the past several years. I can use it to pay the debt off the farm."

"We don't have to marry for that."

"But you do have to marry, don't you? Isn't that what Pastor Collins said?"

Her lips flattened to a thin line.

"You said the men won't listen to your orders. Tell me, do you want to run the farm under your direction?"

A fleeting look crossed her face, but she said, "Go on."

“I can take over the farm for you. I’ve a lot of experience and I can help as you said. And then I can get rid of Jessup Tucks for you. I don’t think he’d leave unless you had the protection of a man.”

Agatha pushed away from the table, her face flushed, eyes hard as raw gold nuggets. “A man to protect me, huh? Well, let me tell you something, Lance Montcalm, I don’t need anything from you. Do you hear?”

Though his face remained impassive, a sinking sensation filled his soul.

“You’re the second man to tell me I need a man’s protection. As if the good Lord Himself is running out of power to keep me safe. I don’t need a new husband or you, Lance Montcalm.”

“Miss Agatha—”

“No, I don’t want yet another pompous man in my house telling me what’s best for me.”

“I didn’t say that, Miss Agatha.”

Aggie darling, can’t you see I just want to be the one to love and take care of you? Is that so terrible?

“But that’s what you’re implying. Get out, Lance. Get out! I’ll figure out all my problems without you or the pastor. Do you hear?”

The dark abyss in his heart continued to suck at his soul. She didn't understand. He wasn't trying to coddle her. He just wanted—

Wait a minute!

A moment of understanding washed over him as the confusion of Agatha's anger vanished.

Her anger was directed at him, a man, not Noah's best friend or even a friend of the family.

His heart soared. If Agatha was seeing him as a man, then maybe she could see him as a husband.

Lance withdrew his hand from her wrist and stood. He had to make sure she continued to see him in that light. That, far from being on the fringes of her life, he was a part of it.

"I am not forcing you to marry me, Miss Agatha. But you do have to admit you have very few choices."

She cut her eyes at him. "You're only giving me one."

"That's because I believe it's the best way for me to give you the resources and protect you at the same time."

"My husband is dead. I've no need for a new one."

"I beg to differ," he responded. "If it wasn't for Mister Paul, you wouldn't be in this situation."

Incredulity slackened the planes of her face. Shame crawled up his spine. That was too low, even for him.

Didn't someone say all was fair in love and war?

"Do you remember it was Paul who showed you how to shoot, and hunt, and corral horses?"

"I know."

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you remember how he gave you your first job so you could begin to earn money?"

Lance gave a curt nod. "I remember that, too."

"So how can you say that?"

"I am not saying it to be cruel or mean, Miss Agatha. Just stating the facts as I know them. I want to help and this is the best way I can think to do it."

He pulled himself away. "I'll give you till tomorrow to give me your answer."

"Tomorrow?" she screeched. "That's too soon. That's not enough time to make a decision."

Lance said nothing as he walked to the door, hearing her follow him from behind.

With his hand on the doorknob, he turned his head to the side. What he longed to say screamed in his head.

I've waited eleven years for you. I would have waited longer. But Mister Paul is dead. Dear Lord, help me, I can't wait anymore.

Instead, he said, "Just think about it, Miss Agatha. I won't rush you into anything, I'll respect any decision you make. Unlike Jessup Tucks and Pastor Collins."

He swiftly opened the door and headed out, feeling her eyes bore into his back.

Please say yes, Aggie darling.



"Mrs. Waters, there's something I need to see you about."

Agatha's back stiffened at the sound of Jessup Tucks' voice behind her. She hadn't even heard him come into the house. Yet, she could feel his breath along the back of her neck.

She looked over her shoulder to see his blue eyes gazing at her with a leer.

"Yes, Jessup?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

She turned around fully, the butcher knife she had firmly grasped in her hand.

The lurid gleam in his gaze left, replaced by wariness.

“What is it?” She walked toward him, the knife not necessarily pointed at him, but it was held directly in front of her.

She didn’t trust him as far as she could throw him.

“I wondered if you had more time to consider my proposal.”

Agatha blinked. “Proposal?”

“Yes. When I asked you to marry me?”

Her skin crawled. She’d rather marry tree bark. “Oh that. I’d quite forgotten about it.” And she had until he reminded her of it.

A flush stained his cheeks, his eyes narrowing.

“As I said then, Jessup, thank you for the offer, but I have no wish to marry you or any man.”

Although that might be changing.

“Mrs. Waters, I’ve always had the utmost respect for Mr. Waters and for yourself. He spoke often of his wish to make sure you were taken care of if something happened to him. I got to know your husband quite well and he

thought mighty highly of you.”

“I thank you, but—”

“Don’t let a ‘no’ be your final decision.” Jessup’s words came off as a warning, not a consideration.

Her fingers flexed on the handle of the knife.

“A farm like this is hard to manage. I’ve put five years of my life out there and I want to continue to do so.”

“As I said then, no. I will not marry you.”

He took a step forward, and she raised the knife slightly higher. They stood, staring at each other, wondering who would capitulate first.

Suddenly, Jessup moved, faster than she would have given him credit for. His large hand wrapped around her wrist holding the knife and with a vicious yank, he tugged it out of her hand while bringing her body flush with his.

She hissed and he shuddered at the impact. Trying to move away, his other arm went around her waist, clamping her to him, while holding both of her arms behind her.

She struggled to free herself, but it was to no avail.

Unlike the appreciation she'd had for Lance's hard muscularity, feeling protected by his strength, Jessup's solidarity frightened her. He'd proven he could take and overpower her whenever he wanted.

"Let go of me," she demanded with as much ice in her voice as she could muster.

Instead, he backed her up, tossing the knife to the floor. The small of her back hit the edge of the counter, entrapping her.

He leaned forward, his blue eyes dilated with want and she tried to stretch away, but he leveraged his weight and imprisoned her in the cage of his arms.

His head bent, and she heard him inhale. "Lord, you smell sweet," he murmured.

"Get away from me." She kept her voice hard and firm, even though her heart slammed inside her chest.

"I wish I could," he said, bringing his head up to stare into her eyes. The desire in them made her want to retch. In fact, she could taste the telltale sourness coming up at the back of her throat.

"For five years, I kept away from you. Out of respect for Paul, who had pity on me. But he's gone and it's been some time since the

preacher told all those widows to get married. I've given you time to grieve for him. My patience is running thin. Those women at the saloon don't have anything on you, Mrs. Waters."

"It'll wear down and disappear before I give myself to you, Jessup."

His fingers lifted and stroked the side of her face. She tried to tug away, but he gripped her chin in his hard fingers, holding her still. "You'll have to eventually."

"What?"

It wasn't what he said as much as how he said it. With such confidence as if he knew something she didn't know, which made the blood congeal inside her veins.

"Nothing," he said, letting go of her chin, and trailing his finger along the column of her neck to rest in the pulsing, shallow groove of her collar bone. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

"Of course, I do," she answered without thinking. "I am my mother's daughter."

"I've never met your mother, but if she had just half of your beauty, she must have been extraordinary."

His breathing started to escalate as his

finger shifted further down. "In fact I would think—"

The hold on her arms loosened the slightest, his focus on his wandering finger drifting downward. With a primal yell, she broke free and shoved him away with every ounce of strength she had. He stumbled back, and she whirled around and picked up the knife from the floor, holding it tight in her hand.

"You get off my land right now. Don't ever come back."

Instead of anger, or even irritation, Jessup laughed. He didn't even look winded from what she did. "Your land?" he asked in an incredulous tone.

Her eyebrow arched. "What are you talking about?"

His eyes held an unholy gleam of pleasure. "Oh, you'll find out, Mrs. Water. I'll give you time to do that."

"Speak plain to me, Jessup. What are you talking about?"

Wagging his finger at her, he headed out of the kitchen. "And by the way, I'm not going anywhere. And if I were to leave, believe me, all those men are coming with me."

Her stance finally relaxed when she heard the door shut. Running, she ran and locked it and the other door as well. She checked the windows, too, before she collapsed against the doorframe that led from the kitchen to the great room and slid to the floor along with the knife.

What was she going to do?

Paul had always said she was a smart woman. She didn't feel intelligent right now.

She felt like a downright fool.

Remembering his hands on her skin, she felt another wash of bile coat the back of her tongue. Remembering his labored breathing and that sick desire in his eyes.

Jumping to her feet, she ran to the kitchen and pulled out a bucket, emptying her stomach in a violent retch.

When she was spent, she sat back on the floor.

Now that her disgust and fear were gone, she was able to think clearly.

Jessup had overstepped his bounds, going further than she'd ever thought he would.

He had done it because he had the idea that he couldn't be made to answer for his actions.

Her long brows lowered over her eyes as

she thought about the conversation. “Your land?” he’d said with that mocking, patronizing tone.

Yes, it was her land. So why would he imply differently?

What was it he knew that she didn’t?

Groaning, she got up. She had to go through Paul’s papers and ledgers. See if there was something there she was missing.

Meanwhile, what did she do about Jessup?

What did she do about Lance?

Both men wanted to marry her. One for his own sick desires, and the other as a sense of obligation.

Was marrying Lance the only option?



Chapter Four

“No, Agatha, you can't do it.”

She looked at her reflection in the mirror, telling herself sternly that tomorrow morning she would tell Lance that she would not accept his proposal.

It was the best answer to give the man.

She would be lying to herself, however, if she didn't admit that some part of her wanted to accept what he had to offer. Thinking about what Jessup did earlier that day, part of her felt she was insane to deny Lance's request.

Of the two men, he was the lesser of two evils.

But he was still dangerous, probably more dangerous than Jessup's lechery.

The threat from Lance had everything to do with the way he'd made her feel.

Pulling away from the mirror that Paul had given her some years back, she gazed off into a corner of the bedroom.

She found herself thinking more about the

past, not wanting to recall anything that happened with Jessup. Her mind accommodated her for once.

Something Lance said earlier that day gnawed at her. When he softly asked her if she ever felt like Noah's mother, she'd been hard-pressed to not say she hadn't.

"You're my wife," Paul had said to her all those years ago. "He's my son. That makes you his mother."

It was a stance she'd never fully accepted. How could she when only eight years separated her and his son?

Thankfully, Noah never resented her presence in his life. He'd very few memories of his mother. According to Paul, Noah's mother had died from cholera when they lived back East.

Yet, even at eighteen years old, she could see it was difficult for Noah to call her mother when they were more likely to view each other as brother and sister.

Lance had spoken the truth about that.

Yet, in front of Paul, Noah dutifully called her Mother, as his father wanted him to. Whenever they were by themselves, he'd taken to calling her "Miss Agatha", something Lance

latched onto himself a year after she'd married Paul.

Though she loved Noah with all her heart, her feelings didn't have a maternal edge to them.

How astute of Lance to say what he had. That small thing had changed the tone of his outrageous proposal. *When had Lance become so assertive?* She had a difficult time reconciling the best friend of her stepson with the man who asked her to be his wife.

Not to mention she could not ignore the fact that Lance had given her that heated look that made her drop the skillet.

That moment was etched in her mind like Moses's law on the stone tablets. She could remember years ago when Paul said if any other man ever looked at her the way he did, he would kill them. She just laughed at that, knowing it was just Paul being Paul. Yet that was the look that Lance had given her. A look that spoke volumes.

How was it that Jessup could look at her with desire and she wanted to rip off her skin, but when Lance did the same thing, she basked in excitement?

Why?

It had her in a state of befuddlement. In all her years of knowing Lance, she'd never had this type of feeling creep over her.

On the surface, Lance could take care of her needs if she accepted his proposal.

Some part of her sensed there was more to what was going on than what met the eye. Not just with Jessup either.

Going over to the bed, Agatha pushed aside the heavy blankets and sheets and settled underneath the covers.

How many nights had she spent alone in this bed since Paul had died? It seemed like forever though it had been less than a year. There were times when she could remember the way he would reach for her in the night. She would be lying to herself if she didn't acknowledge she was still young enough to desire the delights of the flesh.

The thought echoed in her mind with the clarity of a church bell. If she were to marry Lance, he'd have connubial rights to her body.

Agatha waited for a sense of shame, fear, and disgust to come over her. Just thinking about a strange man laying hold to her body had put her in a panic this morning. Jessup's unwanted touch made her retch. So, naturally

she expected the same thing to happen when she thought of Lance.

She lay still, expecting it to happen.

It never did.

In fact, the tiniest hint of excitement wormed through her again.

Agatha sat up in the bed flabbergasted. Why should this be happening to her?

A faint recollection danced on the fringes of her memory once more. What was it that she was trying to remember? It had to do with Lance but in what capacity?

She squinted at the ceiling, not seeing it but instead a blurred image of an autumn day. Brilliant with colors of golds, browns, and auburn reds. She squinted harder as if she were there in that memory. A crystal-clear pond reflecting the autumn leaves surrounding it. Tall grasses swayed in a gentle wind, and amid those tall grasses were... were...

"I just can't remember," Agatha said into the darkness around her. She had a nagging suspicion that the memory she could not recall was important.

Knowing that she wasn't going to get any sleep, she pushed the covers away and got back up out of the bed. Wandering over to the

vanity, she sat before it and toyed with the little knick-knacks on its surface.

Things could not continue to go on the way they have been.

A noise jilted her from her thoughts. She stiffened, the hairs along her neck standing up in alarm.

Jessup wasn't in the house again, was he?

No, that wasn't possible. Agatha dragged her fingers through her unkempt hair. If Paul was here, she would not have even concerned herself with the idea that some man would come and try to accost her in her own home. Even before today, Jessup had always unnerved her. She thought the memory of her husband's kindness to him would be enough to ward off his unwanted advances.

Apparently not.

With a cautious tread, Agatha opened the door and listened.

There! She heard the noise again. It was coming from the front door. The knob kept turning insistently as if someone was trying to get in. Harder and harder the doorknob rattled. Her breath lodged in her throat. She could feel the pulse at the base of her neck thrumming like the hooves of horses.

It had to be Jessup. If it were anyone else, they would have called out by now. Or even knocked on the door for entrance. Only a man with evil intentions in his heart wouldn't say a word.

The doorknob rattled a few more seconds before it stopped. She slid to the ground and wrapped her arms about her knees. Her ears captured the faint sound of footsteps right before she glanced at the window across from her in the kitchen and saw a shadow walk by.

A man's indistinctive shadow. She had no idea who it was.

Though every instinct inside of her screamed Jessup.

Her head fell back against the door. Agatha knew the answer she would give Lance tomorrow morning.

Several hours later, she smoothed the front of her skirt and blouse, rolled her shoulders, and then opened the door to the polite knock upon it.

Lance's dark eyes roved her face, seeing more than she wanted him to see.

"What happened, Miss Agatha?" he asked the moment the door shut behind him.

"Good morning to you, too," she drawled.

“Miss Agatha, something’s happened. What?”

Some instinct told her to reveal nothing of what Jessup had done. She folded her arms. “Someone tried to come into the house last night.”

His brows lowered over his eyes. The muscles along his face tightened. “Was it Jessup?”

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully. “But I think it was.”

“I see.”

“He, or whoever it was, didn’t get in and they left.”

She rubbed her arms, feeling a sudden chill come over her.

“They really rattled you, didn’t they?”

Agatha nodded. “I didn’t expect that. I didn’t understand how vulnerable I would be without Paul. Or, without the protection of a husband.”

Taking in a deep breath, she said swiftly. “I’ll marry you, Lance.”



Lance couldn't decide what to do first. Should he pick Agatha up and whirl her about in his arms? Or should he go and strangle

Jessup Tucks with his bare hands? Both would give him a sense of pleasure. But he knew he couldn't do either of them.

"I think that is the right decision you made."

Agatha's honey brown eyes narrowed. "So, that's all you have to say then, Lance?"

He almost wished he could tell her the truth.

No, Aggie darling. That isn't all I have to say. It will take a lifetime to tell you all of what I have to say.

Lance longed to give voice to those feelings inside for Agatha. The idea that she agreed to marry him, no matter her reasons, sent a wave of pleasure through clear to his soul.

"Thank you for trusting me."

"That's the thing," Agatha said as she turned around, rubbing her forearms as if she were trying to warm herself. He recognized the gesture from all the years he'd known the Waters family. Agatha was feeling unsure and vulnerable.

"I'm not sure if I do trust you."

Lance cocked his head to the side, saddened by her words. Though he could not blame her for her wariness. She couldn't know that the

love he had for her would never harm her.

“Why is that?”

She shook her head, frowning. “There's something more going on here that I don't know about.” She turned her gaze to him again. “Are you hiding secrets from me, Lance?”

A thousand of them.

“No, I'm not hiding anything from you,” he lied to her quietly. “I'm glad that I can take care of you now since Mister Paul is no longer here.”

It seemed prudent to frame their marriage as a matter of circumstance and convenience. He knew she would not be capable of knowing him in the biblical sense. Not right now when the pain of losing Paul was still fresh in her heart. They didn't even need to talk about it.

He *couldn't* talk about it. The very idea, the thought, to suppose, that Agatha may one day, God willing, give herself to him in that manner if he earned her love...

Lance took scissors to that thread of thought. She agreed to marry him. He would only focus on taking care of her and the farm for now. The rest could wait.

To that end he had to focus on one thing

first: making Agatha his wife.

Lance had to pause because the thought of her finally as his wife was almost too incredible to believe.

Hurry before she changes her mind.

“How soon can we be married?”

Agatha gazed off into the distance. “I would suspect that we can be married as soon as possible. From the way that Pastor Collins acted, he would marry us this second.”

As it turned out, three days later Lance stood in the parlor where Pastor Collins married them, nursing a sore fist, and swollen black eye.

Pastor Collins stared with censure.

“I do have an issue with marrying a woman to a man who has been in a fight before he takes his wedding vows.”

Lance smiled and then winced at the action for it irritated his cut lip. “You should see the guy who did this to me. He's having a rougher day than I am.”

Of course, he had not planned on attending his own wedding bruised up, but Jessup Tucks did not make it easy on him.

Getting rid of the foreman of the farm was harder than he thought. In fact, it had been

impossible.

As Agatha had said, most of the men respected him. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that Jessup was a hard worker. Ready to tackle any task given to him. It was hard for the other men to see that behind that work ethic was a man who had almost accosted Agatha.

Jessup and the rest of the men had been shocked to discover that she was going to marry him. When he approached them about the arrangement and that Agatha was putting him in charge of the farm, none of them took it too kindly.

“Why would she marry you when she could have easily married me?” Jessup asked with a furious expression on his face.

“It could be because you were skulking around her house the other night.” Lance was trying to settle this disagreement without resorting to fists, but he had a feeling that it wasn't going to be that easy.

“Are you trying to accuse me of something?”

“Did you try to get into Mrs. Waters' house last night?”

The man's eye twitched a second before he

denied it. And Lance knew he was lying. That had made the rage surge inside of him, but he did not want to accuse the man without having proof that he was indeed the one who tried to get into the house last night.

“Well, Mrs. Waters stated that someone was trying to get into her home the previous evening, which led her to accept my proposal to marry her and thus protect her from unwanted attentions.”

“Did she?” A strange look entered the man’s eyes. As if he were pleased by something.

“I would have been honored if Mrs. Waters had accepted my proposal to marry her soon after Paul had died.”

Lance fought to keep his facial expression from showing his surprise. Jessup thought that a woman like Agatha would accept his proposal to marry her? And why hadn't she told him about this?

That question would have to wait until later. Later proved to be a fist fight.

Jessup had taken exception to being told that he would have to leave. “Paul never had any problem with my working with him. I have always done my job. Why are you trying to get rid of me?”

Lance saw the way the other men were surrounding Jessup in a protective stance. On their faces they wore identical expressions of support and suspicion.

After all, Lance had not been on the farm but for only two days. Why would Agatha trust him to manage the farm more than any of the other men who had been with Paul for the last several years?

He'd try to let the hands know that their jobs were still secure. But Jessup used their nervousness to his advantage.

"Seems to me that you have some ulterior motive in trying to get rid of us here."

"The only person I am trying to get rid of is you. Mrs. Waters is afraid that you may try to bring her to some harm if she continues to let you stay here."

An angry look came into Jessup's blue eyes. "I have never tried to hurt that woman at all."

From there the conversation deteriorated until insults were thrown back and forth between Lance and some of Jessup's supporters.

That led to a physical altercation although Lance couldn't remember who threw the first punch. But as the saying went, he didn't start

the fight, but he sure planned on finishing it. He had a lot to live for. And he wanted to live that as Agatha's husband.

He did 'win' the fight, coming out with less bruises than Jessup. Some of the farm hands had given him glances of admiration, but most didn't. They threatened that if Jessup Tucks left, they would leave, too.

The smarmy look on Jessup's face made Lance want to hit him again.

What to do? One or two men leaving wouldn't affect the daily routine. But if all twelve men left, with as big of a spread as Paul had, it would cause problems.

"I thought it was ridiculous as well, Pastor Collins," Agatha said with a huff of air. "I will never understand why men feel as if they have to solve problems with their fists instead of talking things out."

Lance said, "I did try to talk to Jessup without causing a physical altercation. But he did not want to listen to me."

Pastor Collins cleared his throat. "It seems as if you have some problems on your hands. So let us hurry up this ceremony and then you can get back to solving those problems."

Lance shook his head at the preacher's

reasoning. If only it was that simple. As it stood, when the fight between himself and Jessup was broken up by the men, they all suggested that if in fact the foreman was the one who had tried to hurt Agatha, then they will personally see that he gets sent off the farm.

Jessup seemed pleased with the men's support. But Lance knew a man like that would not allow a woman that he desired to stay untouched for long.

It was a good thing that he was here to protect her. Even if God chose not to have Agatha fall in love with him as he longed for, he could protect her from a man with as wild a dark side as any he had ever met.

As the words of matrimony were spoken, Lance could not help but give thanks to God for letting his dream come true. All this time he thought it would never come to pass. The idea that he was marrying the woman of his dreams, of his wishes, and of his long-suppressed desires, it was almost too much to bear.

He had loved her for so long. Even when he tried not to, love would not be silenced. Inside of his mind it breathed and wailed for an

opportunity to show her the depths of his love.

It was no longer a distant dream, but a possible reality.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” Pastor Collins ended.

Lance smiled, pleased beyond words.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Lance said easily, if a bit too rushed. “We don’t need to do that.”

“Why not?”

Lance froze. The words came from the last person he expected them to come from.

Agatha.

He shook his head. “Pardon me?”

“Why not?” Agatha repeated, a strange glitter in her honey brown eyes. “Didn’t you become my husband today?”

“I did.” Dear Lord, was his collar becoming a bit too tight?

“So why shouldn’t you kiss me?”

“Mrs. Waters, er—Mrs. Montcalm, there’s no need to make this more complicated than it needs to be. We both know that the reason why Mr. Montcalm married you was due to my righteous judgement that you wed to protect yourself from sin.”

“That may be.” She came toward him, every part of her bristling. “I want to know why now that you have me, you won’t kiss me?”

Lance could hardly believe his ears. Agatha was upset that he wasn’t going to kiss her.

Perhaps this was a dream. Jessup must have knocked him out cold and he was floating in a world where Agatha seemed downright indignant that he wasn’t kissing her.

Did he want to kiss her? Good heavens, he’d give all his money for one kiss. But she still loved Paul, was still grieving for him.

Well, only if she wanted to, that is. And from the look on her face. She wanted him to.

Wake up, Lance. Wake up!

He surreptitiously pinched his arm, wincing at the pain.

I’m awake.

“Mrs. Montcalm, perhaps you can talk about that amongst yourselves, after you sign the certificate.”

“I’m not signing anything until you kiss me.” She took a step closer to him, her eyes flashing.

Lance couldn’t decide whether he was in heaven or hell.



Chapter Five

What on earth are you doing, Agatha?

The voice in her head screamed at her, trying to tell her to stop her foolishness.

What had possessed her to act so forward with him? She should not want him to kiss her. Yet here she was, practically bullying him to put his mouth on hers.

Why?

She didn't quite understand her actions herself. A part of her seemed to be watching this from outside herself.

Was she addle-brained from whatever threat Jessup had over her? No, there was more to it.

From the outside, she could see Lance's inscrutable, albeit somewhat surprised face at her words. But other than that, he wasn't as affected by her announcement as she wanted him to be.

The same as he'd been for the past three days.

In that time, she watched as Lance had taken over the duties that had once belonged to Paul. Wanting to get an idea of where the farm stood on a financial basis, he'd gathered Paul's ledgers and spent an evening looking through them. Paul had learned to read and write later in life. As he'd learned, he jotted down everything he could about his farm.

"I can see why he needed to get a loan although I can't tell which bank he used to gain it," Lance told her the other night after she made him dinner.

He'd worked with some of the men in the fields that day, wanting them to get used to his presence before telling them of their upcoming marriage.

"Before the drought, the crops were doing fairly well. There was some trouble a few years before that, but it seemed like you all pulled through."

She'd nodded. "It was about five years ago. We had some problems, but Paul worked it out."

"That's what the ledgers show as well. But the influx of cash kept the farm afloat for a while. But the drought made things difficult."

"I'll say," she remarked dryly, remembering

the downcast look on Paul's face weeks before he went to rescue the men, never to return himself.

Lance made notations along the margin. Her eyes were fixed on the other markings in the ledger, seeing Paul's handwriting.

She'd swallowed.

"The winter made it harder," Lance said, scrunching his black, slender eyebrows. "So, we're low on feed, seeds, fertilizer, and more necessities." Lance tapped the table, his eyes fixed on the corner of the room, but she knew he was in deep thought.

"I think the best thing to do is to get the stores back up and plentiful. We may have to order from beyond state lines, but it's necessary. It'll affect what crops can be planted but if we—"

On he went, already taking over the farm as if it belonged to him.

But it didn't. It belonged to her. Paul had given the farm to her as a present for their fifteenth anniversary.

"Noah doesn't want to be a farmer," he had told her in a wry tone. "Although I would rather keep this in the family, I don't want to force my son into an inheritance he doesn't

want.”

Agatha remembered trying to tell Paul that years before. Noah had confided in her that he'd no wish to stay in Last Chance or with the farm. But Paul hadn't wanted to hear it at the time.

When Noah became a man, he'd left home, going back East to work in the factories, returning to the life that his father had left for the west.

The irony hadn't been lost on her husband.

Instead of saying 'I told you so', she'd rubbed her husband's back in a comforting gesture. "Are you going to be all right with that, Paul?"

"What can I do about it?" he asked with a lift of his shoulders. "If the boy doesn't want the farm, the boy doesn't want the farm. I can't make him want it. Besides, after I'm gone, he may sell it and what will happen to you?"

What indeed, had reverberated in her mind as she returned to that moment in Paul's study, listening as Lance made plans for the farm.

She resented that. Why, she couldn't articulate. Perhaps it was the way he'd come

in and took charge.

Didn't he remember it was Paul who taught him? How dare he roughshod over his hard work?

That's not fair, a voice in her head decried. *He's doing this to protect the farm.*

I know that, she'd argued back.

But it made Paul's death, which she had thought she'd come to terms with, seem that much more permanent.

Was that why she hadn't been so eager to send those replies to those men? If she had replied to those men...

She would have to move on. And that was difficult.

But why was she upset with Lance when all he was doing was trying to help her save the farm? The answer came to her as she stood there waiting to see what he would do at her challenge to kiss her.

Yes, that was it. She wanted Lance to kiss her. She knew what she was worth and what she looked like.

Without being vain, she had taken on the beauty that had once been her mother's. Lance acted as if he was not affected by it and that in turn affected her.

As he had said, he was only a few years younger than herself. So why should he act as if she wasn't beautiful?

"Miss Agatha, are you sure that's what you want me to do?"

She kept her arms folded and waited.

Agatha knew she was behaving like a fool. But Lance's palms on her forearms as he grabbed her were like hot irons, burning their way through her dress to her skin beneath.

Heat radiated through her, making her feel as if she was glowing all over.

This was not a good idea.

Their eyes met and Agatha knew she'd crossed a boundary, one she had taken such pains to stay behind.

Now, it disintegrated with her impulsiveness.

Still, Lance hesitated, giving her time to change her mind about what she asked.

Agatha knew she should take it back, but she didn't.

For one thing, though he was aware of the fact she was being impulsive, she saw the glitter in his gaze like the way he looked right before the cast iron skillet fell on her foot.

She saw the way his throat bobbed up and

down and felt the light wisps of air as he breathed through his slightly parted lips. When his wide nostrils flared, she knew he had inhaled her scent. Why shouldn't he have? She'd gone through great lengths to smell nice and clean on her second wedding day.

And speaking of those lips, they were wonderfully masculine and full, with a perfect angel dip framed by his mustache. His beard neat and trimmed drew attention to his strong neck.

Her eyes continued to run over him, and she thought how handsome he was. A clean white shirt and pants with a string necktie. No other adornment graced his powerful frame and yet, he looked better bruised up than some of the back East men she'd known twenty years ago.

A far cry from the young man her stepson called his best friend.

In that moment, she admitted the awful, complicated truth to herself.

Agatha wanted Lance Montcalm, her new husband, to kiss her.

She was drowning in his beautiful dark eyes, or eye rather since the other one was nearly swelled shut.

She wanted him to kiss her more than anything else in the world.

On the heel of that revelation, she wondered if she were being unfaithful to Paul. Was she supposed to be feeling this way? He'd only been gone a few months, and until Lance came back into her life, she hadn't wanted another man at all.

Agatha flinched slightly as Pastor Collins said, "Really, I don't have all day for this. Either kiss your wife or don't. It doesn't matter."

Lance's gaze flared briefly, before narrowing. His darkened eye moved slowly over her face, dropping at last to her now parted lips.

Suddenly, she remembered what it was like to be the object of a man's desire. A man's, not a boy's. She felt her body respond, everything all at once warm and tingling. Her face flamed along with the rest of her.

She had no more time to think about it because Lance lowered his head.



Lance never believed in the concept of purgatory, but this moment felt a lot like one. Hanging in the balance between heaven and

hell as he drew closer to Agatha's lips. He hadn't planned on kissing her today. Had planned on waiting until some distant future.

Lord knew he'd been waiting for this moment since he was nineteen years old and eleven years later, one of his most fervent wishes came true and he was here as Agatha's husband.

His first kiss with her could have waited a little longer. At least that was what he told himself.

But for whatever reason, she challenged him, and he wasn't strong enough to resist the opportunity to share one kiss with the woman he'd loved for so long. One kiss, just on his wedding day, and then he'd wait until she would be ready to possibly explore more with him.

Then his mouth touched hers and shot all his resolve to the winds.

How soft and pliant her lips were! It was a discovery of the most valuable kind. Heart hammering, he pressed hard against her mouth.

She moaned and heat exploded behind his one good eye.

Lance liked that sound she made, liked how

the feel of her lips melted against his own. Her sweet surrender to his mouth filled him with the intoxicating power to do as he pleased and it pleased him to draw her even closer, pressing her body against his so all her womanly curves could sear him.

It also pleased him to no end to fit his mouth more fully against her and have her lips part in such a way to give him access to a deeper well of pleasure.

For how long it lasted, he'd no idea. All he knew was that it pleased him mightily when he felt her hands reach up and over his shoulders, clinging to him as if he were a rock and she a ship in a storm-tossed sea.

Although perhaps it was Lance who was at the mercy of the storm, for every part of him was buffeted by waves of love and passion, dragging him into and under honey brown waters from which he wanted no rescue.

A harsh, extremely loud cough broke through his blurred senses. He dragged his mouth away from Agatha's.

Her bewildered blinking told him how far removed she was from Pastor Collins's parlor. From everything else but the kiss they shared.

She was breathing hard, but then so was he.

“Now that that's over, can someone please sign this marriage certificate so we can be on our way?”

The sound of Pastor Collins's voice was jarring but Lance needed that to cool the hot blood still rushing through his veins. That kiss was better than he ever expected, even dreamed of. It would be easy to become addicted to Agatha. More intoxicating than opium.

Lance turned away from her and took the pen that Pastor Collins gave him and signed his name on the certificate. He stepped back a little bit to let Agatha sign her name as well. Looking down, a fierce pride went through him as he saw that she signed her name with his surname. He gave a private prayer of thanks to the Lord for giving him the desire of his heart.

But the other part of him now clawed at his restraint. He thought he could wait until Agatha was ready to give herself to him, but after what they shared, he knew waiting would be hard.

They said nothing leaving Pastor Collins's home. The sunshine wasn't too bright, and autumn was fast approaching. Somehow, he

had to go on with his life as if it had not been teetered off its axis.

“Lance, we need to talk,” Agatha said as she halted in their walk.

“What is it you want to say?”

“I should apologize for making you kiss me when that wasn't something you wanted to do.”

“Something I didn't want to do?” he repeated. A dry laugh hovered behind his cut lip. He almost enlightened her about what he'd wanted to do but decided to say instead, “What exactly do you mean?”

She looked away. “I know that you kissed me the way you did because you are a man. Men are given to pleasure more easily than women are. I understand this and I don't want you to think that there is more to this than what it is.”

Now that his skin had cooled, he asked her, “Why did you want me to kiss you, Miss Agatha?”

She looked back at him, her honey brown eyes gleaming. “Miss Agatha? I think you can call me Agatha now as I am your wife.”

His face burned. Of course, he could call her Agatha now. Although he really wanted to

call her Aggie darling. In his private thoughts that's how he thought of her. As his darling.

“My apologies. Old habits die hard.”

“Don't I know it?”

She knew he was waiting for an answer to his question, but once again she grew silent. Lance knew Agatha well enough that he recognized she needed some space.

He helped Agatha into the small wagon that he procured from the livery, being careful to try to blot out the awareness of her satin, soft skin, or the delicate bone structure his fingers enveloped. Then he got in the wagon and they started to drive back to the farm outside of Last Chance.

He let the silence encapsulate them. The air hummed like a vibrating rubber band.

As he waited for Agatha to answer his question, he turned his mind to more practical things. He'd sent a telegram to his bank to transfer the money that he had to the bank here in Last Chance. Earlier that year before he decided to travel back to Nebraska, he'd obtained a bank draft for the full amount he had in his account. The bank he chose had hired Wells Fargo to transfer the physical cash here to Last Chance. Now he was waiting for

the arrival of the cash so he could make use of it.

Unlike Noah, farming had always appealed to him. If he hadn't been in love with Agatha, he would have stayed with Paul on the farm. He'd gone away over the years to escape his attachment to her, but he always returned when the need to see her outweighed his need to keep his sanity.

Now he didn't have to.

"I guess I was resentful of your presence," Agatha said, drawing him out of his thoughts.

"Have I done something wrong?" He did not want her to resent him for anything.

"No, you haven't done anything wrong. I guess you are helping me but part of me feels as if I am betraying Paul by letting you take over the farm."

"If you don't want me to do this, then I will stop. You can still have the money you need to make whatever changes you'd like on the farm."

Lance had no wish to distress her.

"No, you don't have to do that. I'm just a silly woman being silly. You've become extremely capable in the time away and I know Paul would have been pleased that you

have taken over things. You were like a son to him just as Noah was. It's just that it seems to be happening so quickly. Being forced to marry, you taking over the management, and everything else, it overwhelmed me. And you seem so unperturbed by things that I wanted to shake you up. I know that doesn't make any sense, Lance. But it is the only answer I could give you."

"I only wanted to make things easier for you."

"I know that now. Women often don't have a say in these things."

"You aren't most women, Agatha. You are Mister Paul's widow, and Noah's stepmother. There's no other woman like you, and if I ever do something you don't want me to do, please tell me."

She turned and finally looked at him. Her honey brown eyes look happier. "Thank you, Lance. Thank you for understanding."

The tension between them relaxed as they journeyed back home.



Chapter Six

The look of fury on Jessup's face as Agatha announced their marriage to the farm hands almost unnerved her. Then Lance took her hand in his.

“Lance will be managing the farm from now on. So you will take your orders from him.”

Jessup did not look too good. She remembered when Lance had told Pastor Collins that the other man he had fought didn't look as good as he did. And he was right. Jessup sported a cut lip and a black eye along with a bruised cheekbone and a decided hobble.

What exactly did Lance do to the man?

Not that she cared how badly hurt Jessup was. Thinking of how he had almost overpowered her she was glad that he would not be able to do anything to her now that Lance was her husband. It felt good to know he could take care of her.

The grumbling of the farm hands did not go

unnoticed, however. Many of them patted Jessup sympathetically on the shoulder. They cut their eyes at her with resentment glaring out from their many-hued depths. Sullenly, they gave her and Lance murmured congratulations. She wondered if any of them would stay before the month was out.

Nor could she forget the look on Jessup's face as he turned away. It was an expression that said he had every intention of getting back at her for marrying Lance. Did he really think after what he did that she would willingly give herself to him? Obviously, the man was deluded. Yet, Agatha could not prevent the slight worry shiver that slid down her spine like a cold drop of rain.

But that was hours ago now. Night had come and activity on the farm ceased.

Agatha slowly put on her long nightgown and waited until she heard Lance stop moving in the bedroom. This was the night she dreaded ever since she agreed to marry him. Although she knew he had every right to her body as she did to his, she felt as untried as a virgin bride.

Goodness knows, she and Paul had not been shy with each other since the first day they

married. But she had never intended on marrying again. Now here she was, Agatha Montcalm.

And her husband was in there waiting for her on their wedding night.

She swallowed hard. After that kiss they shared in Pastor Collins's parlor she knew that Lance expected more from her. And Agatha's own sense of marital duty would not allow her to back away from that physical obligation.

But she had to admit she wasn't ready. Women rarely were though. For some reason she kept thinking about Paul. Remembering their passionate moments. How could she allow another man to touch her? Even though she had responded to Lance's kiss, had allowed her senses to be swept away by it, all that had followed was guilt.

Guilt that she had enjoyed another man's mastery.

Tears beaded in her eyes. Dear Lord, was she more like her mother than she thought? Was she a complete wanton? Given to pleasure no matter who the man was?

Agatha vigorously shook her head at her reflection. No, she wasn't like her mother. If she had been like that woman, she would have

been unfaithful to Paul with the many hands that came and worked on the farm over the years. So why was she feeling so torn apart by her attraction to Lance?

“None of that matters now, Agatha,” she told herself as she tugged hard on the material of her nightgown. “All that matters now is that you go in there and consummate this marriage. He is expecting it and you will fulfill that expectation.”



Lance knew he was in trouble when the bed dipped slightly as Agatha joined him there.

His heart started pounding. Although he knew they weren't going to consummate their marriage for a while, it was still agony to be next to the woman and not want her in that way.

Of course, he could have taken the other room in the house, but no one had ever accused him of being a saint.

If he had to wait until such a time that she could give herself to him, this stolen pleasure of having her by his side at night would suffice for now.

At least he hoped so.

The soreness in his eye had dissipated

some. When they came back from Pastor Collins's parlor, Agatha had nursed him, taking the witch hazel and patting it along his bruised body. He winced when she put it on the cut of his lip.

"Don't smile for a few days," she'd ordered laconically.

That made him laugh, which only hurt worse.

"And that's what you get, Lance."

He couldn't help shaking his head. "Just like old times," he murmured. "When Noah and I used to get into some scrape or another, and you had to nurse us back to health."

"Only for you both to do it again," she finished for him.

Her face had brightened at the thoughts. "For the most part though, if I had to have a son, the Lord gave me a good one in Noah. He was rambunctious, but never a trial."

"And me... Agatha?"

The intimacy of calling her by her name, coupled with the sharing of memories they had, charged the atmosphere. He had been sitting in a chair, but he was tall enough that she was nearly eye-level with him. Her honey brown gaze roved over his face.

Then, she lifted her hand, and traced his face. Running her fingers over his eyebrows, lightly touching his swollen eye, and drifting on to his nose, and his mouth, before she dug into his beard.

There wasn't anything romantic in what she did, more of a cursory inspection. Lance had the distinct impression that she was using her hands to explore his face as a grown man.

Throughout the years, whenever he came to her with cuts and bruises, she tended to him. But that was as a boy. Perhaps she knew his face as well as she knew her own.

But this was different. Her light touch had riveted through his body like bolts of lightning although he fiercely held himself in check. As far as she knew, he married her to protect the farm and herself from Jessup.

He didn't want anything to jeopardize that notion of hers. Although the kiss they shared may have put that at risk.

"And you," she said slowly, withdrawing her hand from exploring his face. "Are my husband."

The fact screamed in his head as she settled next to him in bed now. Thank the good Lord the bed was large enough. Paul had been a big

man, and Lance was no slouch himself. It gave him enough room to cling to one side and she to the other.

She wasn't doing that, though.

What in the—!

Agatha sidled up next to him and put her arms around his neck. So great was Lance's shock that he could do nothing more than let himself be drawn down to her.

When her lips were a hair's breadth away from his, he gripped her arms and stopped her.

"Agatha, what are you doing?"

He was close enough in the darkness to see her blink. "It's our wedding night, Lance. What do you think?"

He wanted nothing more than to continue down this path. But he knew she wasn't ready to give herself to him. And he wasn't ready to take her.

Well, maybe that wasn't quite true, but it was the right thing to do.

"I thought this was a marriage of convenience," he said slowly.

She made a scoffing sound. "I don't believe in marriages like that."

Lance felt his eyebrows scuttle into his

hairline. "You don't?"

"No, they're ridiculous."

His mouth opened and closed several times while his mind churned. He could have her in every way if he wanted to. Right now in fact.

So why was he hesitating?

"Why do you think that?"

"Man and wife are meant to give themselves to each other. Anything else, and they might as well not marry. I knew when we married that you and I would be man and wife in full."

Lance bit back a groan.

Lord, why do you do this to me?

He had to tell her.

"Miss Agatha—er, I mean, Agatha, I had no intention of having you as my wife in that way."

"What?" She jerked up to a sitting position, which he was glad for. He sat up along with her.

"It's the truth. I married you to help with the farm and to protect you from Jessup. I didn't expect for us to consummate this marriage. At least not right away."

"Are you saying that you don't want to have me as your wife?"

With every drop of blood in me.

“I’m saying that I don’t think we should, not right now.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” she huffed. “Why ever not?”

“Because you still are grieving Mister Paul’s death.”

Silence came after his words. He could see in the meager light of the room that her features had slackened in surprise. “Paul?”

“Yes,” he said. “I know how much you loved him. And everyone in the world knew he loved you, too. It was one of the many things I enjoyed as a child. Seeing you and he love each other so fiercely. I often wondered if I would have the same type of love for my wife when my time came.”

That much was true. As a boy, he’d watched Paul and Agatha living married life totally devoted to each other. Never did Paul miss an opportunity to share a kiss or a hug from her.

As he matured, he started to want a woman that reminded him of Agatha, knowing she was the pinnacle of woman any other would have to fall in line with.

The longer he searched for a woman like

that, the harder it became to find her. For, in truth, there was no other woman like Agatha. Any other would be a fraudulent copy of her.

"Then why did you kiss me like that?" she argued with him.

She blew out a puff of air and that errant curl went flying up over her forehead.

"Like what?"

"Like you wanted me. Don't pretend that you didn't kiss me that way."

He swallowed. What to tell her? "I'm a man, Agatha. And you are a woman. A beautiful one."

"I know that," she said without a hint of arrogance. After all, she was just telling the truth.

"If a beautiful woman challenges a man to kiss her, wouldn't he take her up on that challenge?"

Lance didn't want to say those words. It lessened the impact of the kiss they shared into something that a man merely indulged in.

"Is that all it was then?"

"I have kissed women before, Agatha."

Only two. Noah's wife, Ivy, at their wedding. And Mary.

He didn't like to think about Mary, though.

Thinking of her always made him feel sad.

“I’m sure.”

“Tell me something, Agatha. Do you still miss Mister Paul?”

Silence met his words for a while. He thought maybe she wouldn’t say anything, but then in a tiny voice she spoke. “I miss Paul all the time.”

“As you should,” he said gently. “Goodness knows I miss him and I wasn’t married to him.”

A watery laugh escaped her mouth. “Oh, Lance.”

“So why would I try to consummate this marriage when you are still in love with your husband?”

She sucked in a deep breath. “I thought that’s what all this meant. That I am supposed to move on from my grief. Get on with my life.”

“Get on with your life?” He shook his head. “Come here.”

He gathered her into his arms, and held her close. Her head rested against his shoulder. As he did, her body began to shake.

“Agatha, how can you get on with your life when the man who was a part of it for twenty

years is gone?”

“We were married longer than I’d been single.”

“Only by a year or two,” he said. He hugged her tighter, feeling her tears moisten his shirt. The greatest tenderness overwhelmed him, submerging that burgeoning passion that nearly overtook him.

“Paul was a good man, and he deserves all your tears. And you will never stop loving him.”

It hurt to admit that. Why avoid the truth? It didn’t help anyone.

“I won’t. But I thought that since we were wed—”

“I wouldn’t want you to give yourself to me out of obligation, Agatha. Only if you want to.”

“But—”

He touched her mouth with his finger, feeling the softness. “No buts, Agatha. I’m a big boy now. A man. I won’t throw a tantrum because I can’t get what I want.”

“But do you want me, Lance?”

Every moment of every day.

“What man wouldn’t?” he said instead. “But I’m in no rush. If and when it happens, we’ll

both be ready for that then, huh?"

She stared up at him, her eyes glassy from tears, reminding him of a little girl.

"All right, Lance."

"Till then, I'm helping my friend's stepmother in the most unorthodox fashion anyone ever thought of."

She laughed and sighed.

He thought she'd pull away from him, but she cuddled closer against his chest. Lance hoped she could feel how heavy his heart beat at her nearness.

Soon, all he felt was her sleep-weighted body as she fell into slumber.

When he was certain she was sleep, he bent and kissed her gently on the forehead. "I love you," he said against the skin of her forehead.

Then he drifted off to sleep with Agatha in his arms.



Chapter Seven

Agatha thought she knew Lance, the boy who became the man. In the past week she discovered there were layers to the man who she'd once known as a boy.

His kindness and tenderness on their wedding night had done much for her. By letting her decide when she wanted to consummate their marriage, it made it easier for her to come to terms with what she wanted from it. Any other man would have taken advantage of what she had offered, and she would not have found fault with that decision.

After all, it matched her own views about what a marriage should be and what it entailed. But Lance wasn't any other man.

In the past week since she saw he was a diligent, thoughtful, and introspective person. Though she had known him most of his life, it was like opening an old box and discovering hidden treasures she had never seen before.

It was a given that he would be a hard

worker. Paul had taught him the value of that and from sunup to sundown he worked in the fields along with the other men. Though they still resented his intrusion into their lives, no one could fault his work ethic. What Jessup thought about this development she didn't know. She knew the men had threatened to leave if he were fired and for right now, they were stuck with his unwanted presence.

Between Lance and Agatha there was an unspoken agreement that they would not discuss the foreman. In fact, she had not seen him in the entire week since her marriage. Although she wanted to ask Lance about his whereabouts, she refrained from doing so. He was in charge now and she had to trust his instincts about what he was doing.

Every day he went to the bank in town to find out the whereabouts of the bank draft for the funds needed to pay back the loan that Paul had taken on the farm. The problem they were having was finding out which bank he had obtained the funds from. It happened five years ago, and though Paul had been very meticulous in recording the day-to-day operations of the farm, for some reason he did not notate this vital information.

Lance was determined to track it down though and make sure he paid the loan with its accrued interest in full.

It was taking some getting used to adjusting to the way Lance did things as opposed to how Paul did things. Paul had been somewhat of a haphazard manager of his time. He had relied more on Jessup taking care of the day-to-day things while he oversaw other aspects of the farm. Lance, on the other hand, wanted to know every single element involved. For some of the farm hands they found it intrusive. Before the week had gone two of them left.

Agatha mourned the loss of the farm hands, but she knew that it was bound to happen.

When she asked Lance what he was going to do, he gave her a knowing look and said, "Hire new hands."

And he put an advertisement in the newspaper. Agatha appreciated that aspect about him. In fact, there was a lot she appreciated about Lance now that she saw him as a man and not as her stepson's best friend.

Thinking of Noah made her realize that she had yet to tell him that she and Lance had married. She wasn't sure how he would take the announcement. Lance was his best friend,

and he may not find it a good idea that they had wedded. At first she had a difficult time coming to grips with that aspect of their relationship. But now in this past week she had come to not see it as a barrier to making this marriage work.

She wanted to send him a letter and let him know, but she decided to wait.

Today she was making another loaf of bread for dinner. Outside, she could hear Tiny hollering for the men for their lunch. Lance would not be home for several more hours, preferring to spend lunch and breakfast with the men. He worked hard to ensure that they would understand he was working with them and not over them. But today as she put the bowl of bread on the window sill for it to rise, she heard the door open.

Lance's distinctive tread sounded on the floorboards. And there was another tread as well. One she was sure she wouldn't have to hear again.

She composed her face just as Lance and Jessup came into the kitchen.

"What is going on?" she said without preamble. Although she had never told Lance what happened, the memory of it still lingered

like a mist.

“I figured out where Paul got the money to keep the farm afloat.”

Slowly she looked back and forth between the two men. One had a grim expression while the other looked smug.

And then she knew.

“You must be joking,” she said as she huffed, sending the curl flying into the air. “What?”

“It’s true,” Lance continued, his body and face taut with tension. “It seems Jessup gave Mister Paul the money five years ago.”

She blinked. “When you came here,” she breathed out.

“That’s true, Mrs. Montcalm,” Jessup said in a tone filled with disrespect.

“But Paul told me he found you lying behind a saloon, drunk and smelling like a skunk. As a matter of fact, I remember when you first came here, you smelled like one!”

“That may be,” Jessup said unperturbed. “I was in a bad way. I’d just won at the gaming tables in town, but I wasn’t happy. Paul helped me. In gratitude, I gave him the money I’d won at the tables since I had nothing to spend it on.”

“He wouldn’t have just taken the money, Jessup.”

“No, he didn’t. We made an agreement that he would pay me back over time, which is why I work here. But, in the event of his death, I would become the owner if the loan wasn’t repaid within a certain timeframe.”

She stared at Jessup, feeling her skin crawl. No wonder he seemed so confident about his place here. He owned it.

Agatha didn’t even have to guess why Paul had made such an agreement. He needed the money, but he wouldn’t have wanted charity. So, the most honorable thing was to use the funds he received as a loan that he could pay back.

“How much of the loan was paid back through wages?” she asked.

“Not nearly enough.”

Her eyes drifted to Lance, and he shook his head at the unspoken question. The funds he would receive from the bank wouldn’t be enough to cover the loan.

“I’d never planned to call in the loan, Mrs. Montcalm. But you gave me no choice.”

She glared at the man. “You’re despicable.”

Lance folded his arms across his chest.

“How many of the men out there knew about this?”

“None,” Jessup answered. “It was an agreement between Paul and me.”

Agatha almost swore. What to do? They couldn’t get out of this by asking for a bank loan. No one she knew would help.

Except...

No, that wasn’t an avenue she could ever traverse down.

“When is the loan to be repaid?”

Jessup licked his lips. “In a month. And I want the entire amount up front or you are going to forfeit your land.”

“I see.” Lance looked at Jessup as if he were a bug. “You can go now.”

The man left and Agatha shook her head. “If Paul were here—”

“We wouldn’t be in this situation,” Lance finished for her.

She looked up and saw the concern in his eyes. “I know.”

“Come here,” he said softly.

She did as he asked, falling into the comfort of his arms like she had on their wedding night. “I don’t know what to do.”

“The first thing Mister Paul taught me was

to pray.”

She smiled. “He told me the same thing, too.”

“‘Lance,’ he said to me, ‘Pray over your land, your body, and your wife and kids. Everything else follows that.’”

“Sound advice.”

Lance took her hands and they prayed together. It had been a long while since she’d sent a prayer heavenward except as an afterthought.

His low voice soothed her, and she added her own prayers, feeling comforted. Silently she prayed about her and Lance to give them a chance to... to...

Help me make this marriage work. Save our farm.



Lance walked the perimeter of the fence two days later. The men were working in the fields and Jessup was nowhere to be found. He preferred it that way.

After he discovered that it was Jessup who had given all the money to keep the farm up and running, he told the man that his services were no longer required. Jessup had left with hardly another word. But before he did, he

called back over his shoulder. "I'll see you before long."

The money that he received from mining gold in Black Hills territory had yielded a tidy sum. He'd kept it in a bank as he had nothing to spend it on. When he'd presented the idea of using the funds to help with the farm, it would have been ideal to work with the bank on repayment.

A bank would have accepted a lump sum and then would have possibly agreed to an extension. But Jessup would not do that. He would use the fact that Agatha had scorned his proposal against her.

Feeling let down and defeated, Lance wondered if he should write to Noah and see if he could borrow money from him. On the surface, it seemed as if Noah would be fine with loaning his stepmother money. But it would bring all sorts of other questions to the forefront. And Lance wasn't ready to answer them.

Lance leaned against the fence and stared out at the wide expanse under the Nebraska sky. He turned his thoughts away from the problem of Jessup and to Agatha. They'd been married for over a week now and what he

always knew about her was coming to fruition.

That he still loved her. That his love was based on something real and he probably loved her more now than ever.

Being with her every night, feeling her soft body curl up into his was worth losing sleep. It was torture of the most pleasant kind. He had to learn to suppress his masculine desire for her and give her the time she needed. Though it led to some tiring days, he didn't regret his decision. At least he didn't think so.

He walked down the fence looking over the vast field. It would devastate Paul to know that he will lose his land. The man thought that Jessup would be so grateful for his help. That he wouldn't call in the loan on his property. Very rarely was Paul wrong. Lance wished he hadn't been wrong in this case. His eyes lifted and he saw Agatha walking along the fence further down the property line.

Lately she had been taking strolls along the property looking around as if she were looking at it for the very last time. He could not allow that to happen. They all had wonderful memories of being here on this farm. Jessup would not take that from them. But how to pay the man and get him out of their lives?

Lance had to figure that out.

Suddenly, Agatha screamed, her cry flying out over the fields. Without a second thought, Lance ran to her. She fell to the ground, and he thought his heart would burst through his chest.

“Aggie darling!” He ran as fast as his legs could carry him until he came to where she curled up on the grass holding her ankle in her hands. He fell next to her.

“What is it?”

“My ankle,” she groaned as she writhed back and forth. “Copperhead,” she gritted out.

A snake. He looked around, but he knew the snake would have left already, having done its deed.

“We’ve got to suck the poison out,” he said, already grabbing her ankle and yanking off her shoe.

“Dear Lord, it hurts,” she moaned, falling back into the grass, her eyes closed, face flushed.

Before Lance could appreciate what he was doing he’d lifted her ankle and bent his mouth at the same time, pressing his lips against the bite and began sucking at it.

Agatha screeched. “Lance!”

She jackknifed to a sitting position, holding herself up by her elbows.

“It’s the only way to get the poison out,” he told her, fitting his mouth to her flesh, and drawing it. The faint taste of blood filled his mouth.

“Oh, my Lord,” she said again, her head falling back.

Lance worried about if he were getting it out. He spat and did it again, several more times, hoping and praying the venom wouldn’t take his Agatha from him.

He wasn’t sure what it was that made him realize it. Perhaps it was the way her face had stopped scrunching in pain, or how her fingers grabbed at the blades of grass and held on for dear life.

Whatever it was that called to him made his stomach contract as he watched her. Agatha’s head lifted and her honey brown eyes were like twin flames of gold. Her lips were parted, and she was breathing shallowly.

Without any conscious thought, acting purely on instinct and a latent masculine intent, he lifted her ankle higher and sucked on the spot where the snake had bit her more slowly reveling in the way her eyes turned to

narrow slits, her lips falling further apart under the ragged panting sounds that were coming from her lips.

The realization that she was beyond hearing or seeing anything brought a swift jab of masculine satisfaction.

But he had to stop. He swore he would give her time to come to him and with everything within him, he would.

When he abruptly removed his mouth she gasped, her eyes showing him that she got carried away. Lance decided to salvage her pride and his by pretending that he hadn't even noticed her response.

"I think that helped," he said as offhandedly as he could. When he saw the redness of the spot, despite all he did to suck out whatever venom was there, he said, "I would die if I lost you, Aggie darling. Just die."

She gasped again and he looked up from her sore ankle to see surprise and shock in her gaze.

"What did you say?"

Too late, he realized what he had done. He'd given himself away with his words. She must have heard how desperate he sounded,

his anguished words that a groom of convenience wouldn't have said.

Somehow, she'd figured out that he loved her.



Chapter Eight

The next week Lance walked out of the bank in Last Chance, bemused and surprised at what he learned. The amount that he thought he had deposited into the bank when he cashed in the value of the gold he'd mined had been recorded incorrectly. The Wells Fargo delivery man had also included a banker's letter apologizing for the mistake. It seemed they had made a number of errors with the account holders of the bank and were desperately sorry for their incompetence.

Lance couldn't believe it. The bank draft was more than enough to pay off what was owed to Jessup and to have a bit left over to furnish the necessities needed for the farm.

He couldn't wait to get home and tell...

Lance paused before he could finish that thought. Agatha had been acting oddly ever since the day he had sucked the poison out of her ankle. She didn't necessarily avoid him, but he saw her inquisitive glance on him more

than once. Was it because she had discovered that he was in love with her? It had to be. When he thought that copperhead had taken her away from him, he'd unleashed the agony of his affection in those few words. She did not say anything, even when he lifted her up into his arms and carried her all the way back to the house. Which was no small feat. Although Agatha wasn't a heavy woman, carrying a body around for the better part of an hour would tire even the strongest man alive.

Gently he deposited her onto their bed. He washed her feet and tended to the bite adding an ointment known to ease the aftereffects of a snake bite.

Still she remained so quiet.

That night when he came to bed, she had clung to her side and stayed there for the entire night. He would have thought not having her next to him would ease him into slumber, but it had the opposite effect. He'd gotten used to her soft weight against his own. With all that, he felt as if a part of himself was missing. Lance had a new appreciation for the way she was missing Paul.

The next morning, he caught her staring at

him. But he was unable to read her expression. And for a man like him who fancied that he knew everything there was to know about his wife, it frightened him.

"No need to focus on that now," he said aloud. "All that matters is that we are able to get rid of Jessup once and for all."

When he arrived back at the farm, he rushed to the house and found Agatha sitting at the table staring at nothing.

So deep into her thoughts she was that she didn't hear him enter. Lance took that brief opportunity to drink in her loveliness. How he wished he could come up to her, take her in his arms, and kiss her like he did that day in Pastor Collins's parlor.

He moved back a couple of steps and then deliberately stomped his feet. She jerked as if a hot poker had been thrust down the back of her blouse and looked at him.

"Oh you are back," she said unnecessarily, standing up and smoothing her hands on her skirt. "I did not hear you come back."

"I just arrived and I have good news to share with you."

"Do you?"

Briefly he told her the situation, watching

as her brown eyes lit up like flames from the Sun. "Oh, that is wonderful news! We can get rid of that horrible man once and for all."

Lance lifted her by her waist and spun her around in the circle. When he set her down she was breathing heavily and her eyes had a strange slumberous look in them that he responded to on some instinctive level.

And just like that he cupped her face and kissed her. It wasn't the exploration of when they were married. This was a deep drugging need to have her as his own. He brought her closer to him, tilting her head back and delving further into the kiss. She made little sounds that went straight to his head, sending him further into pleasure.

Her fingers tangled in his thick hair holding his head to her own. It was as if they were both being bathed in heat and passion. If the door had not been suddenly flung open. Lance had no idea what would have happened. As it was, they broke apart heaving raggedly.

With a supreme amount of control, he turned and blocked Agatha's flustered appearance just as Jessup came to stand in the middle of the kitchen.

Something of what happened between them

must have shown on his face because Jessup looked furious.

"I have decided that I am going to call in your loan and I want the payment today. If you don't give me the money, I will take possession of this farm immediately."

Agatha came from behind Lance, her eyes hard now and no longer soft with passion.

"Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to tell you this, Jessup. Take your money and get off my land."

The man looked surprised, his light brows arching into his forehead. "What?"

Lance said nothing, but handed over the bank draft that had the entire amount of the loan that Jessup had given to Paul. "Get out."

Jessup stared down at the bank draft, his mouth open and his eyes filled with shock. When he looked back at them again, his face had contorted in rage. He opened his mouth to say something when Agatha held up her hand. "There's nothing more you need to say. Get out."

He snarled like a wild animal, crumbling the bank draft in his fist, and stuffing it into his pocket.

Lance finally understood that Jessup had

used the loan to subtly control Paul over the years.

All that ended today.

The house shook as Jessup pivoted away on his feet and stomped outside the door, slamming it shut behind him.

When he turned back to look at Agatha, she was gazing at him with eyes that looked a whole lot like they were filled with love.

“Aggie darling?”

“I think I’m in love with you, Lance Montcalm.”



Agatha smiled at the way Lance looked.

Like he’d been given the best present ever. Her love.

“Are you just saying that, Aggie darling? Do you really mean it?”

She took his hand into her own. “I do mean it. I just didn’t know until today.”

Her ankle still throbbed somewhat from the copperhead snake bite that had let her know how much Lance cared for her.

She’d been thinking about the farm, and the obligation to Jessup. Feeling down and out, when she didn’t pay attention to where she stepped and came into contact with the

copperhead.

Pain had muddled her senses, and then, without even calling out his name, Lance was there.

She'd almost lost her mind when he put his mouth on her sensitive feet, remembering that first day he came back, and how he tended to her foot when the skillet fell on it. The mixture of pleasure and pain had intertwined in such a way that she thought she would lose her mind.

His mouth on her flesh had made her feel delicious. All those feelings she thought only belonged to Paul were erupting inside of her as he sucked on her ankle.

That's how she knew she was in love.

"Why today?" he asked.

Taking his hand, Agatha led him back to the table and sat him down. She kept their fingers intertwined.

"Have I ever told you about my mother, Lance?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Well, it's a difficult thing to talk about. She's a madame."

His eyes widened. "A madame? Of a house of—"

“The same,” she said. “It wasn’t all her fault though, Lance. She had grown up as a fancy girl during slavery, being sold three times to three different owners who misused her. Yet, her beauty was legendary. The third man who bought her was also my father.”

“I see.”

“When I was a young child, she convinced him to gamble for her and my freedom. It was risky because my father was obsessed with her, to the point that he was cruel to her more than the other men. But he loved to gamble and she knew that. If she won, she would gain her freedom. If she lost, I’d lose my chance at freedom. So, she won.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Agatha patted his hand, caught up in memories from the past. “But freedom came with its own difficulties. She had no other way of making a living. So she came out here and opened a saloon, one of the few Negro women to do so.”

“I grew up in a saloon, knowing about what happened between men and women at a young age. As I got older, and I knew my mother’s story, I was angry that she had chosen to do as a freewoman what she’d been

forced to do as a slave.”

“I see.” His fingers tightened on her fingers.

She glanced up into his eyes. “You do,” she said in wonder. “You really do.”

“My own mother had taken the same route,” he revealed. “But, she was killed one day when a man got upset because she refused him.” Lance’s gaze darkened. “My father never got over her death, and after a while, he left and never came back for me.”

Agatha nodded. “Paul suspected that, you know. That’s why he took you in.”

She took in a deep breath. “As I was saying, I was upset with her for what she was doing. When I met Paul, he had come into the saloon to get a drink, and nothing more. I wasn’t sure, at the time. He saw me watching him from behind the bar, and he came over to me. Before I knew it, I was married to him.”

“What did your mother think?”

Agatha pressed her lips together. “At first, I thought she was upset with me, but I realized something years later. She was upset because she wouldn’t see me as often, if ever, since I moved with Paul. But, though I was in her lifestyle, she never made me a part of it.”

“She protected you.”

She nodded. "The same way you protected me that day with the copperhead."

"Aggie darling."

"There's something else, too. Ever since you came back, I've been trying to remember something. It had to do with you, but every time I try to recall it, the memory slips away."

She smiled. "Until today."

Lance swallowed hard. "What is it you remember?"

Agatha's words painted the picture of an autumn day eleven years ago. Leaves falling around in a shower of color. Tall grasses by a pond. She'd been walking along, enjoying the weather and she glanced up and smiled.

Young Lance was sitting by the pond's edge, his head bent over. The wind chose that moment to blow, and a scarf she'd lost was pressed to his face. His eyes were closed in a painful kind of ecstasy, and in the moment, she knew.

"You were in love with me back then, weren't you?"

Lance averted his gaze. She could feel him looking at their hands. "I was nineteen years old, and all I could think about was you. The Lord knows I tried not to. After all, you were

my best friend's stepmother. And you had taken care of me in the same way that you'd done for Noah. How could I be in love with you like a man is in love with a woman he wants as his own?"

He groaned, tugging his grip from her. "I tried to suppress it, Aggie darling. I thought something was wrong with me. But that day you'd lost your scarf, I'd found it. Instead of giving it to you, I kept it. Like some crazed fool."

"Why?" Her heart thrilled at his words.

"It was the only way I could be close to you. I knew you loved Mister Paul. Everyone knew. There wasn't any chance for me to ever gain your love. I tried telling myself that many times over the years, but it never stopped."

"That's when you left?"

He nodded. When he looked back up at her, his eyes were glassy and bright with unshed tears. "I couldn't bear being near you, wanting you, and not being able to have you. To see the love between you and Mister Paul was too much. And who could I tell? Noah?" He made a scoffing sound. "He would think I was insane."

"But you always came back."

“To see you. To be near you. To suffer and live in your presence.”

His sweet words filled her with joy. “Oh, Lance.”

“I did try to find someone else to love. In fact, I did find her.”

Agatha listened as he told her the story of Mary Smith, a former slave who worked on one of the ranches he’d been employed at. She was beautiful and fragile, but utterly willing to be his wife. He had tried to make a life with her, courting her, and even asking her to marry him.

“The day before the wedding, I dreamt of you calling to me and I couldn’t do it. I still loved you and I wouldn’t settle for anything less than you. Going to Mary and telling her that I couldn’t marry her was the worst thing I’d ever done. She cried and wailed against me, but I would rather have given her pain before than after we said our vows.”

“Lance, I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it, Aggie darling. I have always loved you and will love you till the Lord takes my breath away.”

Agatha stared at him. “I was happy and blessed with Paul, Lance. Although I could not

give him children, he never held that against me.”

“I wouldn’t either. It’s you I want.”

“I can see that. My mother had given herself to so many men, that I couldn’t fathom letting another man touch me like Paul. Just the thought of it made me sick. But not with you. I knew then that it had to be love. Not just because of that, but because you’re a kind, sweet, and gentle man. I love being around you.”

Lance gulped. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

She stood and beckoned him to her. Cupping his face in her hands, she said, “Believe it.”

The next little while was silence, as Agatha showed with her kisses and murmured sweet nothings, how she felt about this man. By the time they pulled away, Lance’s eyes glittered the same way they did when he arrived.

“Aggie darling, I’ve waited my whole life for you. I didn’t want anyone else.”

“You told me,” she purred, smoothing her hand over his arm.

“I mean, there’s never been anyone.”

Her fingers paused over his arm, and she

looked at him in shock. “Lance?”

“It’s true. I gave everything I am to you eleven years ago. It’s yours to do with what you wish.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded.

“Well, Mr. Montcalm, let your wife show you the best way to love her.”

Several months later...

Noah Waters opened the letter he received in the mail. It was from his stepmother... and his best friend, who had become his stepfather.

Could life get any more strange? But he was happy for them both. When Lance wrote that he had married Agatha, he’d been shocked but not surprised. He’d known for a long while that his best friend cared for his stepmother.

His father had known, too. But he had sworn him to secrecy, telling Noah that if he died and Lance was still free, he would be glad that Agatha would be well loved and cared for by Lance.

It seemed his father was a prophet.

“What’s that, Noah?” His wife asked as she

came into the room, one hand clasping their two-year-old and the other holding a newborn baby.

“It’s from Miss Agatha and Lance.”

“Oh, we haven’t heard from them in a while.” She came closer. “What does it say?”

He read the letter, and then read it again.

“Well, I’ll be.”

“What? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. It seems that my stepmother is going to have a baby.”

“Really? I thought she couldn’t have children.”

“So did she,” he said, shaking his head. “Lance wanted to know if they have a boy, would I mind if they named him after my father.”

Ivy cocked her head to the side. “Well? Do you?”

Noah sniffed. “No, I wouldn’t mind at all.”

THE END

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 - Cat Cahill
- Heather Blanton
- Laura Ashwood
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